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The Experiences of First-Generation University Students

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Introduction

The ever-changing demographic characteristics of university institutions have led to subsequent increases in the enrollment of first-generation students. As it stands, approximately 34% of students entering university may be defined within such a label. (Pascarella et al. 250). Although specifics of the definitions vary slightly in accordance with each particular study, generally speaking, first-generation students are defined as “students from families where neither parent had more than a high-school education” (Pascarella et al. 249). Inherent in this definition resides the assumption that the majority of such students come from working-class backgrounds—although this is not universally the case. Nonetheless, the background characteristics of such students inevitably deviate from the majority, who typically come from middle-class homes (Pearce 257). Thus, it is of paramount interest to derive sociological insights from the experiences of first-generation students, as such experiences also deviate from the majority in many dimensions.

There has been a recent governmental push for university institutions to establish specific funding and programming directed at first-generation students. Although the theory behind such programming displays much awareness and progress, the reality is that they fall short. Such programming fails to acknowledge the full range of first-generation experiences, and simply assumes that “efforts to involve first-generation students in various university activities will [lead to] educational success” (Grayson 606). Furthermore, much of the research on first-generation students places them within a framework of passivity, wherein such students are viewed as passive acceptors of their lower-class positions. Such a stance discredits mobilization, and portrays students as victims of their class backgrounds. This approach is overall unjust, and there is a need to recognize that while first-generation status may be conducive to unique issues, none of these issues are all-encompassing, and many can be transformed into motivational forces.

This particular paper works under the assumption that the students have found a way to confront barriers to university access, and have already gained enrollment within an institution. Therefore, mention is not made of prior high-school academic experiences, nor is there any mention of financial issues. This allows for a full exploration of unique experiences within the university setting, as they pertain to support systems, engagement within the university, and academic achievement. Following the path of previous research, such experiences will be framed within the theoretical confines of Pierre Bourdieu and his cultural reproduction theory, which speaks to issues of capital. These arguments will be enhanced through theories of cultural mismatch, as well as the works of Erving Goffman and his notes on stigma.

Support Systems (*Mentors, Educational Values, Transition Guilt*)

Upon entrance into a university environment, all students encounter a cultural shock as they transition into a new realm of social and academic experiences. From the perspective of Bourdieu, students bring set levels of capital into their new settings, which have been established within previous contexts. Often, these capital factors can systematically exclude certain groups of people from participation. This theory of cultural reproduction posits deficits in cultural capital as the major force seeking to exclude first-generation students from middle-class dominated institutions (Grayson 606). Within this context, cultural capital can be defined as “the degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the dominant culture of a society” (Pascarella et al. 252). Although first-generation students have overcome the threat of cultural reproduction by breaching working-class barriers to admission, they nonetheless experience substantial tension in navigating a system in which they have traditionally been excluded (Lehmann 632). More specifically, first-generation students are disadvantaged by their lack of support systems with

privileged knowledge of university life (Pascarella et al. 267). Furthermore, a working-class background often means a lack of value placed upon higher education, such that these students are often deprived of motivational support. Finally, first-generation students often feel a level of guilt as they begin to accumulate middle-class cultural capital, and leave their working-class habitus behind (Lehmann 632).

Mentors

Deficits in cultural capital translate into lower likelihoods of having beneficial mentorship relationships to navigate the university institution. This position of mentorship support is unlikely to go unoccupied in the lives of middle-class students. Mentors are particularly beneficial to understanding the mores of the educational institution, and for coaching in regards to communicating with staff members, including professors (Grayson 608). Middle-class students reside in an advantageous position, as cultural capital is transmitted through their parents. A lack of previous familial experience makes even the simplest administrative tasks within a university environment more challenging (Lehmann 638). In fact, Pascarella et al. finds that comparatively speaking, first-generation university students display significantly lower levels of degree planning (Pascarella et al. 267). Due to a deficit in capital, these tasks pose greater challenges to first-generation students, as they are left to their own devices. Due to these hurdles, first-generation students report “significantly higher levels of personal stress than did their counterparts with more elite backgrounds” (Granfield 336).

Although universities often provide student services aid within these areas, first-generation students may even be unaware of where to go to receive such information. According to Soria & Stebleton, first-generation students “are less confident in their academic ability and readiness for college-level work and are more likely to avoid asking questions or seeking help from faculty” (Soria & Stebleton 675). For first-generation students, lacking the confidence to do such things indicates a deficit in social capital, which can subsequently cause them to fall behind both socially, and academically (Soria & Stebleton 675). This issue can be framed within the theory of habitus dislocation, as put forth by Bourdieu. This dislocation, also known as the hidden injury of class, can be described as “a psychological burden that working-class students experienced as they came to acquire the ‘identity beliefs’ associated with middle-class society” (Granfield 336). Within this dislocation, not only are first-generation students experiencing great insecurity and hesitation within entering this new environment, but they are forced into positions of cultural outsiders (Lehmann 632)

Educational Values

Coming to university from working-class backgrounds, first-generation students are more likely to have grown up in environments wherein a high value was not placed on higher education. For many of these students, it was simply assumed that they immediately enter the workforce following high-school graduation (Reay et al. 3). In fact, Pearce finds that the habitus of working-class communities creates a sentiment in which many students feel that “people like us don’t go to university” (Pearce 262). This can occasionally lead to a lack of support from parents in regard to their educational aspirations (Soria & Stebleton 674). Here, we see a lack of Bourdieu’s social capital, which can be defined as “privileged knowledge, resources, and information attained through social networks” (Soria & Stebleton 675). Soria & Stebleton find social capital to be passed through parents to their children, and students with highly educated parents often have an understanding of higher education as being important to personal development and overall success (Sonia & Stebleton 675).

There is a tension for first-generation students between university expectations, and the mores which they have previously learned. In deriving notions from Bourdieu, according to Stephens this tension occurs due to a cultural mismatch in capital (Stephens et al. 5). Universities perpetuate middle-class values, particularly through notions of independence. Independence is seen as the foundation of university living, as students are now expected to diverge from their parents in order to find their passions, and take control of their own futures (Stephens et al. 7). This produces a tension for first-generation students, creating a sentiment wherein they struggle to understand and fulfill the idea of the 'student role' (Soria & Stebleton 675). This difficulty in adaptation is due to the working-class promotions and focus on interdependence, and of being part of a community (Stephens et al. 2). These sentiments are highlighted in motivations for being at university, as first-generation students overwhelmingly cite "to help my family out" or "to give back to my community" as their interdependent motivations for attending the institution. On the contrary, middle-class students are more likely to cite "to become an independent thinker" or "to explore my potential and interests" as their independent motivations (Stephens et al. 11-12). The capital deficit for first-generation students situates their scholarly motivations within a completely different context than that of their middle-class counterparts. In the words of Goffman, these students are experiencing a form of identity ambivalence, wherein they are no longer able to embrace their working-class backgrounds, nor are they able to completely let it go (Granfield 343).

Transition Guilt

Finally, it is important to note that many first-generation students may feel a sense of betrayal to the working-class while managing such social tensions. Again, this is reflective of habitus dislocation, such that there is a "painful dislocation between an old and newly developing habitus, which are ranked hierarchically and carry connotations of inferiority and superiority" (Lehmann 633). There is often an assumption that those from the habitus defined as inferior will conform to the notions of the superior habitus. Pearce finds that "working-class students are expected to leave behind their class backgrounds and assimilate into a new elite social class" (Pearce 261). First-generation students often reflect upon their limitations, and feel the need to breach class boundaries in order to enact social mobility (Lehmann 635). Many of these first-generation students may feel as though they are leaving behind their family, and the habitus in which they were raised, in exchange for the adaptation of middle-class mores.

Engagement (*Academic, Non-Academic*)

University settings create for diverse environments through which students have the ability to intermingle with a wide variety of people. Being as the institution is dominated by the middle-class, many first-generation students may feel a level of discomfort due to their unfamiliarity with such an environment. In some cases, "this discomfort [grows] more intense as they [become] increasingly immersed in this new elite world" (Granfield 337). On a more extreme end, many working-class members may "bear the mark of their status" in terms of mannerisms, dialect, and even choices of apparel (Goffman 145). Here, Goffman finds that when the working-class enter into an environment wherein social-class boundaries are crossed, the resulting sentiment may be one of feeling like second class citizens (Goffman 145; Granfield 332). A common response to such a predicament is to engage in class concealment practices in order to avoid stigmatization. This is especially common at highly elite institutions, where the majority of students are from upper-class families. Many first-generation students find that trying to pass as middle-class members alleviates some negatives associated with their capital deficits (Granfield 338). Goffman posits that "because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all

persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasions by intent (Goffman 74). In this case, being middle-class is the norm. Thus, the act of passing allows for a more seamless transition into the new environment, and thus subsequent increases in overall engagement (Granfield 339).

Academic Engagement

First-generation students display lower levels of academic engagement in comparison to their middle-class counterparts. Particularly, they show reduced levels of class participation, insightful questioning, connecting concepts across courses during instruction, and interacting with faculty members during lectures (Soria & Stebleton 679). This comparative lack of academic engagement can be attributed to their social capital deficits. Social capital provides students with the knowledge and resources to fulfill their student role (Soria & Stebleton 675). Therefore, students who lack such capital “may not be aware of the many benefits these types of academic engagements can bring to their development and success” (Soria & Stebleton 675). It is important to note that academic engagement is particularly useful in developing such capital, as it brings about more positive benefits for first-generation students than it does for others. More specifically, an overall sense of belonging is positively associated with such engagement (Soria & Stebleton 681). However, herein arises a paradox where students can acquire such capital through academic engagement, yet they may feel uncomfortable engaging in the first place due to their capital deficits. It is pertinent that universities acknowledge these tensions, as the attrition risks associated with habitus dislocation are reduced if first-generation students feel a sense of belonging (Soria & Stebleton 681).

Non-Academic Engagement

First-generation students also display lower levels of non-academic engagement in comparison to their middle-class counterparts. Lehmann finds that these students may have problems “connecting to their wealthy peers and integrating into university life” (Lehmann 632). First-generation students are more likely to be living off-campus, and to have work responsibilities which take time away from engagement opportunities. Due to this, these students are much less likely to engage in extracurricular activities, be athletically involved, volunteer, or have casual interactions with their peers (Pascarella et al. 265). Thus, first-generation students also testify to the least amount of new friends, and are less likely to attend major campus events wherein such friendships would typically emerge (Grayson 617-18). Unfortunately, this lack of non-academic engagement was found to persist even within universities that had a large number of available opportunities (Grayson 624). However, it should be more positively noted that such class differences began to decrease in the upper years of university, as first-generation students become better adjusted (Pascarella et al. 267).

There are a few reasons for why first-generation students may fail to engage in the non-academic aspects of the university. Firstly, some students may actively resist pressures to resemble the middle-class, and may overtly display their working-class backgrounds. However, such students are likely to create a further disconnect in their ability to establish a sense of belongingness within the university, and often openly reject campus activities. In fact, such students may even feel disconnected from their fellow first-generation peers whom are trying to pass as middle-class (Granfield 339). In order to have the most positive experience living the role of a student, a particular balance must be displayed. This balance was best achieved by first-generation students who “managed a productive tension between ‘fitting in’ and ‘standing out’ (Reay et al. 120). These students displayed their ability to confront the feeling of being out of place, accept their differences, and yet push forward by immersing themselves in the university

culture. A large degree of identity work needs to be completed to achieve such a balance, and the majority of tactics involve trying to pass as middle-class until the feeling of discomfort fades (Granfield 331). Once this feeling fades, it is likely that such first-generation students have accumulated sufficient cultural capital such that they will be able to surpass the limitations of a working-class status (Granfield 333). Non-academic engagement in the university environment is in and of itself a means of capital accumulation, and thus an appropriate path to transcendence.

Academic Performance (*Pressure, Achievement*)

Due to their social and cultural capital deficits, first-generation university students have an overall propensity to under-achieve academically in comparison to middle-class students (Soria & Stebleton 680). This may prove disadvantageous for graduation rates and future career outlooks, thus aiding in the cultural reproduction of differing class experiences. Here, we see again a degree of tension as first-generation students may feel unworthy of participating in university when they underachieve, but may also underachieve due to feeling as though they do not belong in the first place. Research points in the direction of the latter, as such students have clearly earned the right to be in university by way of their high school academic achievements. Therefore, they already possess the intelligence, motivation, and learning skills necessary to succeed in a university setting. Thus, any overall propensities to academically underachieve can be explained by way of cultural mismatch issues, or a failure to take advantage of resources provided (Grayson 605).

Pressure

First-generation students tend to experience higher levels of stress and pressure in relation to grade attainment, as despite their credentials, they often feel the need to prove themselves as worthy of participating in such a middle-class institution. Empirical evidence suggests that approximately 62% of first-generation students feel such pressures in comparison to the 32% of middle-class students who do (Granfield 336). From the perspective of cultural mismatch theory, this finding is unsurprising. Due to a focus on interdependence in their backgrounds, first-generation students' reflect related values into their academic activities. This fails to align with the middle-class norms regarding individualism and independence, such that there fails to be an equal opportunity for success (Davis 5). Here, "students futures are bound by their social class habitus, rather than shaped by their individual abilities or aspirations" (Pearce 263). This misalignment of background values with institutional values creates additional stressors not felt by middle-class peers (Davies 5).

Achievement

In terms of actual success levels of first-generation students, their "academic achievement is not spectacular" (Grayson 62). Overall, they are less likely to be on a persistent path towards a degree, and are less likely to remain enrolled or to even acquire that degree. For those that do attain degrees, their early career earnings are only slightly less than that of middle-class graduates. Overall however, first-generation students are less likely to further their education by enrolling in a graduate or professional program (Pascarella et al. 250). Much of these findings are directly related to learning skills, and making use of available resources. For instance, it was found that first-generation students study fewer hours, were less likely to be enrolled within an honors program, and were more likely to feel that the faculty did not show concern for their progress (Pascarella et al. 251). In many cases, these findings can be directly correlated to the large amount of time being spent immersed in paid work (Pascarella et al. 252). Overall, lower grade level achievements on behalf of first-generation students can be attributed to deficits in

cultural capital, such that these students did not have available mentors to prepare them for a world of mid-terms and essays, and suggest ways to improve (Oldfield 6).

However, it is important to note that there are some contrary findings. A study conducted by Lehmann found that 75% of first-generation research participants “performed at or above-average in their first year” (Lehmann 639). Much of this success was found to be attributed to a particular work ethic that was acquired within a working-class background. This work ethic surrounds notions of hard work and self-discipline as important elements for life success (Lehmann 639). Studies such as this are particularly intriguing, as they portray a more positive picture of first-generation students’ abilities than most. It would be particularly useful to investigate the extent to which the subjects in the study by Lehmann took advantage of academia related resources in comparison to other students.

Conclusion/Limitations/Implications

The majority of research on first-generation students does paint a rather negative picture of their experiences while in university. An overall lack of both cultural and social capital as outlined by Bourdieu makes it difficult for such students to transition into a middle-class habitus. Here, aspects of cultural and social capital are taken for granted and first-generation students may be realizing their capital deficits for the first time when they come to university. The cultural mismatch between working-class backgrounds and middle-class institutions puts first-generation students at an increased risk for both social and academic issues. In accordance with Goffman, students may find themselves adapting to this mismatch by attempting to manage their working-class stigma through class concealment practices, and pass as middle-class.

Although the majority of the research points in this negative direction, there are many limitations to the studies. In particular, most of the studies were based on interviews with a relatively small number of first-generation students. Thus, it becomes difficult to generalize the findings to all first-generation students. Furthermore, it is likely that the demographic characteristics of each university, as it pertains to location and size, would also have an impact on the results. For instance, perhaps first-generation students would feel more welcome at a smaller sized university, wherein there is more student-teacher interaction that could aid in their academic success.

Being a first-generation student myself, I was able to approach the literature from a different perspective than most others. Although the findings were overall negative, I have found my personal experiences at university to be overwhelmingly positive. In fact, the only aspect of these findings that resonated with me was the first-generation disadvantage due to a lack of mentors. Being as neither of my parents had gone to university, I found it particularly difficult to navigate the bureaucracy that university is. Not only were administrative tasks such as signing up for residence, and registering for specific courses difficult, but I also had a difficult time even comprehending what the difference between each degree was. Issues with lacking a mentor became even more prominent throughout the graduate school application process, which forced me to seek out a distant family friend for assistance in navigating such an application. I feel very strongly that I lacked some of the cultural and social capital that most middle-class students already have, but feel that I was able to close the gap between myself and my peers early in first year. I attribute my success as a first-generation student to my focus, motivation, and engagement within the university environment.

Previous research as well as this paper can ideally aid in the development of university policies and programming that specifically target the needs of first-generation students. Kenneth Oldfield has suggest four basic reforms for first-generation students, that have a great deal of

merit being as he was a first-generation student himself. Oldfield proposes that 1) we must develop support systems for first-generation students, 2) We must address issues of classism, 3) We must ensure the class backgrounds of faculty are diversified, and 4) We must also ensure that class backgrounds of the student body are diversified (Oldfield 8-11). At first glance, these broad reforms may be theoretically appealing yet appear difficult to translate into practice. However, adequate support systems can be created in small steps, such as learning skills workshops specifically targeted at first-generation students. Furthermore, issues regarding classism can be tackled by ensuring instructors teach material from all angles, and do not simply provide the middle-class perspective. Finally, ensuring diversified backgrounds of all at the university can be done by altering both the hiring and admissions processes to ensure high levels of representation. These reforms and many others will aid in hindering issues of cultural reproduction, by providing all students a more equal opportunity to succeed.

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